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ABSTRACT

A brief overview of the history of teaching writing reveals a shift from an emphasis on the composed product to the composing process and provides writing teachers who work one-to-one with students with a theoretical seven-stage model of the composing process: starting-point, exploration, incubation, illumination, composing, reformulation, and editing. The sequence of stages is recursive rather than linear, and instructional intervention should be located at four critical points. At the starting-point stage, teachers should involve students in individualized discussion that directs the student through a process of inquiry and clarifies the nature of the assignment. At the exploration or preparatory stage, students should be taught how to amass, contrast, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize data, using developed heuristic strategies. They need to be left alone during the incubation and illumination stages and to be encouraged during the actual composing stage to trust their writing, unfettered by worries about grammatical or editorial details. In the reformulation stage, students need instruction on how to produce a final text in which clarity, logic, unity, organization, and stylistic variation are considered. In the final stage, editing, programed materials can be used, freeing teachers for more demanding and meaningful tasks. (ASA)

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A Theoretic Context for the Writing Lab

In the last ten years, the teaching of writing has changed significantly in North American institutions. "School rhetoric" has once again been recognized as a subject worthy of serious scrutiny and the discipline is receiving the serious attention by researchers and theorists that it deserves. By bringing to bear new insights from such diverse fields as cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, speech-act theory, and the philosophy of language, those interested in writing and the teaching of writing have managed to amass a considerable body of knowledge and to develop what is, in effect, a radically altered, if not a new, discipline.

At the same time, composition teaching has been affected by a different phenomenon: structures for teaching writing have become considerably freer and more flexible, partly because of a greater openness to experimentation at the university level in the sixties and early seventies, partly because of a deep disillusionment with

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conventional composition teaching. This climate has encouraged the development of those writing programs called variously writing centres, labs, clinics, or workshops, which focus on individualized instruction outside the classroom context.

Unfortunately, these two phenomena--the development of research and theory, on the one hand, and more flexible teaching programs, on the other--have often remained distinct, so that the new writing programs have not profited from the substantial body of knowledge offered by the rapidly expanding discipline. Too frequently, the teaching of writing in these centres has not been placed within any theoretic context which would justify, for example, the choice of one methodology over another, one technique over a second. For writing centres have a vast array of possible techniques at their disposal from one-on-one tutoring to small-group workshops or large-group modules, from programmed self-instructional texts, audio-tapes, and videotapes to computer-assisted-instruction. In many labs, the choice of which method to use is based solely on economics or casual empiricism: what can we afford or what seems to be working? Of course, both these criteria must be taken into account in the development of new programs. But what is more important is a theoretic context which will help us to understand what we are attempting to do and to recognize, consequently, the most effective strategies for reaching our objectives.

The fact is that the kind of theoretic constructs offered by the "new rhetoric" are particularly compatible with the newer, freer structure of the writing lab. Indeed, because of the flexibility of its format, the writing lab is far more congenial to the new orientation of the discipline than the conventional composition classroom. Thus, for example, a major re-orientation of the "new rhetoric" has been its shift in focus from the composed product to the composing process. For a long time, composition teaching was dominated by a model which directed attention only to the product, primarily, as Richard Young has pointed out, because of an underlying conviction that the creative process is mysterious and that creativity is a gift of nature, hence unteachable.[1] For the composition teacher, this meant that all that goes on between the initial impulse to write and the completion of the first draft cannot be taught; the teaching of writing thus became largely the teaching of editing skills.

In the last ten to fifteen years, however, researchers and theorists have once again begun to look at the writing process as a whole and to concern themselves with strategies for encouraging or facilitating this process from the earliest stages on. The structure of the writing lab allows for, in fact encourages, such an emphasis. Because instruction is individualized, because teachers

[1]Richard Young, "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana: NCTE, 1978), pp. 31-33.

can meet with students over their work at any stage of their writing, these writing centres are ideally set up to take advantage of the new research and theory. To maximize this potertial, however, teachers and program administrators must develop their teaching strategies with some awareness of the nature of the composing process, the points at which it is beneficial to intervene, and the appropriate strategies for intervention. What is necessary, then, as a theoretic backdrop is a model of the composing process. And the work of those involved in creativity theory,[2] supplemented by contemporary analyses of the rhetorical process, can provide just such a model.

The following model is based primarily on the early work of Wallas and the later refinements of Young, Becker and Pike, and Winterowd.[3] Remembering that the process is a process and that any segmentation is necessarily artificial, we can, nonetheless, distinguish the following stages in the writing process: starting-point; exploration; incubation; illumination; composing; reformulation; editing.[4]

[2]I would like to thank Janice Lauer for -- among other things -- introducing me to the literature on creativity theory.

[3]G. Wallas, The Art of Thought (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1926); Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970); and W. Ross Winterowd, "Developing a Composition Program" in Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition, ed. Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle (Conway, Arkansas: L & S Books, in press).

[4]These stages are not necessarily meant to represent separable or discrete segments of the composing process: the illumination may, and frequently does coincide with the composing; for some individuals, the first draft is the final one, the editing and the reformulating occurring internally either before or during the physical act of writing. Furthermore, the scheme is not intended to suggest a linear sequence in time.

The starting-point is the stage at which the task is analysed and perceived as a problem to be solved; ideally the writer will experience a genuine need to write, to solve the problem set by the assignment, and will dimly perceive what Young, Becker and Pike call the known unknown, the solution that is being sought. The second stage, the exploration, includes all the initial, intellectual preparatory activity: amassing data; doing research; critically analysing the material amassed; dredging from one's memory relevant experiences, ideas, constructs; analysing; comparing; synthesizing; and, in general, focusing one's intellectual powers intensely on the problem to be solved. During the incubation, in contrast, the conscious mind ceases from activity so that the unconscious, subconscious, or supranational powers may operate. Creative figures in many disciplines have attested to the necessity of this conscious withdrawal, and withdrawal of consciousness, from the task at hand to free our less understood creative forces. The illumination is the moment of insight, the "eureka", during which what was seemingly shapeless, disjointed, and without order suddenly assumes form and pattern.

The fifth stage, the composing, involves the physical act of writing the first draft, an activity that may precede or succeed the illumination, or perhaps more typically, may itself bring about or constitute the moment of insight. The reformulation is, in part, what Wallas called the "verification," the testing of the insight

in language; sentences, words, paragraphs are reWorked to approximate more closely the intended meaning while the meaning itself is reshaped under the pressure of its formulation into language. The editing, as opposed to the reformulation, involves the final refinements, the concern with the superficial, technical matters of mechanics, punctuation, spelling, and as Winterowd writes, "the adjustment of the 'surface' of the text so that it approximates . . . Edited Standard English."

Admittedly crude, this scheme is useful in our teaching, allowing us first, to locate those stages where we can successfully intervene and indicating, second, where we ought not to interfere. What is too frequently ignored is that certain phases of the composing process are not only unconscious, but that they resent and resist the intrusion of consciousness. There are times during our writing when we must turn off; sometimes, the best advice is to go away and take a walk or a nap. On the other hand, for the unconscious creative forces to be able to operate, there must have been sufficient preceding conscious, intellectual preparation; the unconscious must be sufficiently stocked, there must be something to incubate.

Although some such sequencing is implied, this model of the composing process is not intended to be linear. On the contrary, the process is essentially recursive, the reformulation often revealing the need for more exploration, and the composing sometimes

necessitating a return to the starting-point. Much of our teaching should be directed towards helping students to realize and respect this recursiveness, this need not just to revise but sometimes to go back to the beginning. In this, we must fight against the bias of most composition textbooks and much composition teaching which reduce the process of writing to the simplistic: choose a subject, restrict your topic, write a thesis sentence, make an outline, then write your essay. Such a view is naive and dangerous, diminishing the creative potential of the composing process by insisting that the "meaning" precedes the writing and ascribing to the process a linearity that does not exist.

Remembering, then, that the sequence is recursive rather than linear, we can locate our teaching at four critical points in the composing process: the starting point; the exploration; the reformulation; and, to a lesser extent, the editing.

The starting-point is where our work as teachers of writing must begin. To suggest that to end well the student must begin well may seem obvious; however, very little composition teaching has traditionally been directed towards ensuring that students do, in fact, begin well. In Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, Young, Becker, and Pike analyse in some detail the nature of the starting-point of any creative and successful inquiry, and they describe the features that must characterize this stage if the process is to be meaningful. And surely the aim of most university professors

is to engage their students in meaningful tasks within their discipline, and our aim as the students' guides in these tasks must be to help them find this meaning in their assignments.

Young, Becker, and Pike point out that all problem-solving (and writing constitutes, for them, a specialized form of problem-solving) begins with an initial feeling of uneasiness, a sense of incongruity, perhaps because of a "paradoxical 'fact' that doesn't make sense . . . an apparent opposition of two respected authorities on an important issue . . . or the seeming inadequacy of a strongly held theory" (p.12).

Assuming then, as is most generally the case, that essays are not assigned in writing centres, that the teachers in such centres help students in writing tasks assigned elsewhere, the task of such a teacher is initially to help the student perceive the problem for herself, that is, to feel the initial dissonance that will necessitate the process of inquiry and make of the assignment a real writing experience. Such a task is delicate and complex; somehow the student must be brought to see and feel the problem for herself. The appropriate strategy is talk, or rather questions on the part of the teacher, patient, probing questions eliciting as much talk as possible on the part of the student.

Indeed when they are most effective, writing labs place all their teaching within the context of a one-to-one confrontation over the student's own work. Although at certain stages of the

process, supplementary teaching strategies may be useful and even preferable, the basis of the program must be this very individualized discussion involving the student and his teacher, focused on the student's work-in-progress.

According to Young, Becker and Pike, students must be encouraged to state explicitly not only the nature of the problem to be solved but also, to the extent possible, the solution aimed at, the paradoxical "known unknown." "Part of the process is the articulation of the difficulty by means of a system of symbols [i.e. language] that can be manipulated more efficiently and more subtly than the data" (p.13). Verbalizing of this kind, at this stage, focuses and directs the subsequent inquiry.

Another goal of our teaching at this first stage of the writing process is to make sure that students understand the nature of the assignment, understand that what is required, for example, is a critical analysis rather than a plot summary, a synthesis rather than a repetition of facts or generalizations, "tautology" rather than "analogy", to use the Britton categorizations. The difficulty is that the conceptual task required is sometimes beyond what students have previously undertaken, and they either do not perceive this or fumble in attempting what is just beyond their reach.

This is not to suggest that students have been inadequately prepared for the intellectual demands made in university. On the

contrary. Such increasing demands are surely to be expected in the course of a normal intellectual progression. Students are continually being confronted with intellectually more challenging tasks as they move up the educational ladder. The difficulty is that they do not always understand the nature of the new demands.

To use a personal illustration, last year, a Biology professor approached the Carleton University Writing Tutorial Service to organize a pilot program for his third year class in ecology. He was concerned that his students weren't writing well. These were all third or fourth year students, most in the Honours program, and they had generally performed successfully in previous Biology courses, all of which required some writing of essays as well as lab reports. In this course, however, there was a significant breakdown in their writing abilities. Some discussion revealed that the level of conceptualization demanded by the professor and the discipline differed significantly from that previously required. First, students were taken out of the lab to confront the real world, with all its untidiness. Second, they were asked to generalize on the basis of this real data, to weigh probabilities, to evaluate other scientific studies in the context of their own research, to analyse and synthesize the work of others, and to formulate an overall conceptual framework. In the face of these more complex demands, many students were not able to perform as successfully as they had with simpler tasks.

Pedagogically, what was interesting was how explicit this professor was about the level of his expectations. In his first lecture and periodically throughout the course, he described precisely the kind of thinking required and the nature of the writing he expected. Yet the students did not hear; they filtered out what they could not assimilate.

It was not sufficient for them to be told: they had to be brought to see for themselves. What is necessary in such situations is lengthy dialoguing, patient eliciting, in which students are encouraged to discover for themselves the kind of critical activity required by their assignments. Such teaching is not easy; in the final analysis, the students cannot be taught, they can only be brought to learn. And tutoring, especially individualized tutoring in a non-threatening environment, has proved to be far more conducive to such learning than lecturing.

The second stage in the composing process at which intervention is possible and profitable is the preparatory stage, the exploration. At the most basic level, some students may need to be shown how to do research, how to gather data or amass bibliographic material. Short modules on the use of the library and minicourses on research techniques are useful for those students who are either inexperienced or misinformed, and this kind of information can be transmitted effectively in a seminar or even lecture format, to small groups or large.

More commonly, however, and more crucially, students need to be taught to think about the data they have amassed: to compare, to contrast, evaluate, analyse, synthesize. As a tool for facilitating and encouraging this necessary intellectual scrutiny, heuristic strategies of different kinds can be recommended. Over the last ten to fifteen years, a significant body of research into and theory about the rhetorical process has focused on the development of such strategies for encouraging or coaxing "invention," the discovery of the argument or the points to make in a specific essay. These strategies are all intended to be systematic but flexible procedures for focusing one's conscious intellectual powers on the subject to be investigated and for mentally manipulating and exploring the problem to prepare the ground for an insight into its solution. Essentially, they are grids or intellectual frameworks for exploring a subject, intended not to replace, but rather to coax intuition. These heuristic strategies include Larson's questions,[5] modern versions of the classical "topics,"[6] and the more extentensively developed strategies presented in the Holt Guide to English (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972) and Rhetoric: Discovery and Change. In the former, William Irmscher

[5]Richard L. Larson, "Discovery through Questioning: A Plan for Teaching Rhetorical Invention," in Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings, ed. W. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), pp. 144-154.

[6]For example, Edward P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) or Jacqueline Berke, Twenty Questions for the Writer (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

develops Burke's pentad for use as an aid in the prewriting process; in the latter, Young, Becker, and Pike present their tagmemic model as a tool in problem-solving and writing.

The most appropriate strategy seems to depend on the given student. Although the basic stages of the composing process are universal, individual writers seem to vary a great deal in the strategies they employ at any specific stage. As she reports in The Composing Processes of Twelfth Grade Students (Urbana: NCTE, 1971), Janet Emig found a great deal of variation among accomplished writers as well as students in the use of outlines during the composing process, and this variation did not relate to the quality of the work produced. Rather than trying to legislate uniformity, then, we should respond to this variation by offering a range of possible strategies; writing centres have the capacity to individualize instruction in this way. Thus, small modules based on one or more of these heuristic strategies offered in workshop format might very well be successful in helping some students find strategies appropriate to the exploratory stage.

At the same time, however, certain less structured techniques are sometimes more congenial for certain kinds of writing and certain kinds of students. Elbow's free writing is one such technique that is often successful, and one that should be monitored initially within a tutorial context. And, frequently, the most effective heuristic is, again, talk; or more specifically, questions,

on the part of the teacher, to elicit as much talk as possible on the part of the student. By asking probing questions, by eliciting their own critical appraisal, we can encourage students to focus intensely and critically as they explore and to place what they are discovering within an overall conceptual framework.

By encouraging talk in this setting, at this stage of the composing, we may be compensating for students who have not the opportunities, in their homes or with their friends, for talk, who have not yet learned the pleasure of playing with ideas, of bringing their intellectual experience to bear on their lives. By helping them discover how to place their ideas within the context of their intellectual lives, we teach them a skill they can later practice on their own. What we hope they will learn is the creative power of language itself. If, at times during the composing process, language seems inert and recalcitrant in our struggle to formulate our meanings, at others, language can be immensely generative, opening new vistas, creating insights where there were none. Through talk in this exploratory stage as well as through writing, students can learn the creative power of language, something that is not realized in the lecture-hall to library stall routine of many students' lives.

The next two stages of the composing process, incubation and illumination, are not subject to conscious control nor to direct teaching. As teachers, we can only encourage each student to allow the unconscious powers time and space for the work that only they can do.

The next stage, the actual composing, is equally inaccessible to direct control. Increasingly, recent thinking has focused on the mysterious and generative power of the physical act of writing a draft. For example, in an article called "Losing One's Mind: Learning to Write And Edit" (College Composition and Communication, 29 (December, 1978) 362 - 368) Barrett Mandell has described his own composing process thus: "(1) I have an idea about something I want to write; (2) I write whatever I write; (3) I notice what I've written, judge it, and edit it, either a lot or a little" (p.363). And he goes on to argue that step one only precedes and does not cause step two: "step one precedes writing and establishes a frame of mind in which writing is likely to occur . . . . It is the act of writing that produces the discoveries" (pp. 363 - 64).

James Britton has speculated further about this phenomenom which he calls "shaping at the point of utterance."[7] He quotes an eight-year-old Newcastle schoolboy's description of his own writing process. "It just comes into your head. It's not like thinking, it's just there. When you get stuck you just read it through and the next bit is there, it just comes to you." Britton argues that "highly effective writing may be produced in just that spontaneous manner," writing whose effectiveness derives from the very nature of its generation because by allowing the discourse to shape itself

[7]James Britton, "Shaping at the Point of Utterance," in Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition.

at the point of utterance "the act of writing becomes itself a contemplative act revealing further coherence and fresh pattern." Writing, then, is not just a record or synthesis of the interpretive processes that have preceded but is itself an interpretive act.

If our writing is to function in this way, we must be able to resist other pressures: pressures to conform too rigidly to preconceived plans; according to Perl and Egendorf, pressures to accommodate our writing too early to what we conceive to be our audience's expectations. In their article "The Process of Creative Discovery: Theory, Research, and Pedagogic Implications," Perl and Egendorf point out that the difference between skilled and unskilled writers is that the latter "apply prematurely a set of rigid critical rules for editing to their written products. As a consequence they frequently lose track of what they mean by becoming caught up in correcting details on grammatical or logical grounds before they have clearly sensed and expressed in some form what they mean to say."[8] All such worries about grammatical and editorial details and such concern about the judgements and responses of one's readers should come into play only after one's meaning has been clarified for oneself.

The moral for teachers of writing is clear. Students are to be encouraged to trust their writing and to follow its flow regardless of previous plans and regardless of the possible judgements and evaluations of their readers. How best to communicate

[8]In Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade (Akron, Ohio: L & S Books, 1979), p. 127.

one's meaning is a secondary consideration. A writer's first concern must be to discover or create that meaning for herself.

Having encouraged our students to trust themselves to produce a first draft in this manner, our teaching should change its thrust. We have come to a different stage--the reformulation. If the first draft has been writer-based, to use Flower's terms,[9] the reformulation should be reader-based: we must teach our students how to use what they have written to produce a final text. At this stage considerations of clarity, logic, development, unity, and organization are important. The teaching of the conventional composition classroom, with its emphasis on what Corbett has called "the holy trinity of unity, coherence, and emphasis" (p. 627) is now useful. All the conventional rulings on the characteristics of formal expository prose are of value in guiding students to reformulate their meaning in a form that is acceptable, pleasing, and convincing to their readers.

Some skilled writers, it is true, have internalized the forms and conventions of English expository prose to such a degree that even when they "shape at the point of utterance," what they produce conforms to the norms of the genre as much as to the writer's sense of what she wanted to say. For less skilled writers, however, that initial draft is a discovery draft and extensive redrafting is necessary to produce a piece that will be effective in the eyes of a reader, especially a reader accustomed to the conventions of formal academic prose.

[9]Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," College English, 41 (1979), pp. 19 - 37.

In his taxonomy of discourse, James Kinneavy distinguishes various possible formal patterns of written discourse according to six aims.[10] Among these, he differentiates writing in which the writer's aim is to explore a problem from that in which he intends to prove a thesis; these two are radically different, each implying a different organizational pattern for the essay. This distinction is a fruitful one for our teaching. Although the student's aim in the first may be to explore the problem and discover her ideas, in the finished version her aim must be to prove a thesis, and the organization of the essay must be correspondingly altered.

At this point, general discussions on the structure of the argumentative essay, to large or small groups, may be useful. What is most useful, however, is a joint reworking of each student's own first draft. Once that initial draft has been written, students will have discovered, or they can be brought to see what they really would like to say in their essay, and therefore they can be brought to reorganize their drafts accordingly, by moving sections around, by developing those points that need elaboration, by filling in the gaps between arguments, and--most difficult of all--by cutting those sections that are no longer relevant. Such an exercise is only seemingly expensive in time. By going through the process of accommodating their own exploratory formulations to the conventions of formal prose, students learn more about writing as well as about English prose than they would in many, many hours of lecture time.

[10]James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971).

At this stage as well, students should be taught about stylistic variation, the range of options offered by our language and the rhetorical implications of each choice. Prime candidates are students who write "Dick and Jane" prose as well as those whose writing is marred by those syntactic messes which are marked by marginal "awks," which generally indicate that the students are attempting a structure they are not yet comfortable with. At all costs, we must resist the temptation to tell these students: simplify your style, break up your sentences into small units, avoid these complex structures. To recommend that students return to the safe structures they have mastered is to stifle their attempts at growth. Instead, they should be encouraged to work with any of the popular exercises involving sentence manipulation, such as sentence-combining, either individually, using models of those syntactic structures the student hasn't yet mastered, or in groups.

And for once, working in a group is preferable; the students need to discuss the stylistic options available, to see each others' combinations, to hear the responses of others to the versions they have produced in order to realize for themselves the syntactic and stylistic possibilities of the language.

The final stage of the composing process is the editing. For those who favour programmed materials--auto-instructional texts, audio-cassettes, computer-assisted-instruction--now is the time. On the whole, we can learn the conventions of punctuation and footnote

form almost as well from a book or a machine as from a person, and we can free the person thus for the more demanding and meaningful teaching. Certain kinds of drills may be of some use at this stage as well, provided that the exercises reflect the kind of writing and the kind of language the students really use rather than the bizarre textbook dialect presented in the exercises and examples of some of the popular handbooks and workbooks.

These, then, are the stages of the composing process. Each stage is distinct, and each implies its own teaching strategies, though the possibilities may be various--far more various, in fact, than I have implied. My pedagogic comments have been intended as merely suggestive; others working in the field will surely have other techniques at their disposal that are equally, if not more, effective in helping students overcome the difficulties they may experience at any of the different stages of the writing process. The important thing is to bear the composing process in mind and to sequence and focus one's teaching accordingly.

And even the theoretic framework I have outlined was not intended as dogma. As the discipline develops, and the field is expanding rapidly, researchers and theorists will offer us new insights into the nature of the composing process, and these must be incorporated into our theoretic structures, as well. Whatever has been offered here is provisional, and must be subject to continual modification, qualification even radical revision.

Nevertheless, some such framework, however provisional, will always be necessary, in order to give coherence to our programs and to provide a rationale for our decisions, to create a context for our thinking and a focus for our teaching.